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Senate panel's snoop-proof office

By LANCE GAY

In anticipation of the opening of the new strategically located Soviet Embassy, the Senate Intelligence Committee has quietly relocated from the Capitol to a snoop-proof, aluminum-clad and security-shrouded office.

Its glass doors are unmarked and opaque, and a 24-hour-guard and state-of-the-art security protects the room where some of the nation's hottest security secrets are debated.

"No one is going to be able to penetrate this room from the bottom, top, side, front or rear," said an Intelligence Committee aide.

The meeting room is actually two rooms: a special steel alloy chamber inside the outer walls, with a dead-air space in between that is so sensitively monitored that any air movement triggers alarms. Double metal doors into the inner chamber are radio-frequency sealed to prevent any transmission. Committee security head Don Wynnyczok said the room is also electronically monitored "just in case."

Only senators, staff members and special witnesses enter the chamber. It is electronically swept for bugging devices before and after each meeting, and a three-man security team sorts through the trash to destroy any secret documents. Staff members must have the highest security clearance. "We can see everything the government's got," said press secretary Sam Bouchard.

The room, which cost \$478,000 and took six months to build, is a new home for the committee; for eight years, it met in a small room in the dome of the Capitol that was time-shared with other committees.

Tourists and reporters aren't encouraged to try and find the office.

"You are only allowed to come in here if invited, and

you have to sign in on the log, get a badge, and you're escorted to wherever you are going until you leave," a committee aide said.

Unlike the committee's previous office in the Capitol, there are no rear doors or special hideaway elevators that allowed CIA officials and senators to sneak in and out without public notice.

But reporters must seek permission from the Senate sergeant at arms to wait outside the committee hearing room to try and catch people as they come and go from closed-door hearings.

For the past eight years, the committee — which oversees secret CIA operations and scrutinizes the budgets of the various intelligence agencies — has been closeted in a fourth-floor hearing room in the Capitol.

But the National Security Agency confided to senators that the room was not secure from electronic eavesdropping and found that the new Soviet Embassy, built on a northwest Washington hillside site dominating the city, could allow the Russians to snoop electronically on what the committee was doing.

That revelation has caused other Washington institutions to scramble — literally.

In the past year, the Pentagon has installed new underground phone lines and a secure phone system to scramble the conversations of its generals and admirals. And Congress is studying a proposal to install some 23,000 secure phones in other top government offices to thwart snooping efforts.

Although their new embassy is nearly completed, the Soviets aren't being allowed to use it until a new U.S. Embassy — located in a low-lying area of Moscow — is finished.

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